



**Rocky Mountain National Park
Continental Divide Research Learning Center**

Historic Trails

The Question: Which of Rocky Mountain National Park's trails qualify for the National Register of Historic Places?

The park hired historian Sierra Standish to determine which trails would qualify for the National Register of Historic Places, the nation's official list of properties significant to our history, culture, engineering, architecture, and archaeology. To qualify, places must generally be more than 50 years old, be significant for their representation of broad patterns of American history or method of construction, and possess historical integrity. Integrity means the trails must have original materials, reflect original construction techniques, and generally retain their historic alignment.

The Project: Research primary and secondary sources to assess the historical significance and integrity of the trails.

The project involved thorough research in numerous archives found in Denver, Estes Park, Boulder, Grand Lake, Hot Sulphur Springs, and Fort Collins. To piece together the history of trails, Ms. Standish checked primary and secondary sources including photos and personal journals in the park's museum storage facility, superintendents' reports in the park's library, maintenance records in the trails shop, newspapers in the town library, and brochures and maps in state and local archives. She also interviewed trail workers past and present. To determine the significance of the park's trails, the researcher must understand their historical context on a national, regional, state, and local level. Thus she searched secondary sources on the maintenance of trails and development of parks, including sources on the work programs of the 1930s and the park's post-war development, known nationally as Mission 66. The researcher found other nominations for trails in Glacier, Acadia, and Grand Canyon National Parks as well as in Colorado National Monument. To understand the trails and assess their historic integrity, she hiked 100 miles of trails.

The Results: Because trail maintenance techniques have changed little over time, numerous trails qualify for the National Register.

Ms. Standish identified 15 trails that most likely qualify for the National Register. Fern Lake exemplifies an early, very popular trail that was constructed and maintained by lodge keepers and local tourism boosters before the national park was established. Natural and built features—i.e., lodges, bridges, waterfalls, creeks and lakes—identified the path. Even though the alignment shifted in its early days, the trail continued to connect these important features. The Longs Peak trail is significant as an almost legendary trek to the top of a prominent Front Range Fourteener, attracting hardy tourists since the 1860s. The trail is also where Enos Mills developed and honed his naturalist skills, preparing him to become the most vocal advocate for the creation of RMNP. In addition Ms. Standish found that maintenance on park trails has not changed significantly over time. Placing trails on the National Register has two benefits: it helps the park leverage funding for maintenance and it assures that the park's trails will maintain their historic integrity well into the future.



Bridges, overlooks, rock walls, signs, lakes, waterfalls, stands of vegetation, and views are all important elements of historic trails.



Historian Sierra Standish and Ranger Jim Detterline discuss historic resources on the Longs Peak trail.